Boys' Night

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Boys' Night

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

Dick's reconciliatory stakeout with Tim doesn't go as planned.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

Whumptober Alt.: Jealousy
Whumptober Day #3: Isolation
Whumptober Day #10: Lips Sewn Shut / Touch

Dick had a headache.

That was his excuse for the tension around his eyes and mouth, the brittleness that he couldn't fully wipe away even with a practiced smile. A ready excuse to offer, called out or not, because he couldn't afford to be called out. Couldn't afford to mess this up.

He had been looking forward to this weekend. It had been a long time, too long, since he had been able to leave Gotham behind. Chicago wasn't far, but it was further than Bludhaven. And he wasn't Batman anymore. He was back to just Nightwing, sent out on a mission in another city, an envoy while Bruce held down home base. The mantle and the city were two weighted capes dropped from his shoulders, allowing him to straighten, to breathe.

And it was supposed to be his weekend with Tim. Dick missed his brother. They were on better terms now, at least. After Bruce's supposed death and stunning return, there had been nowhere to go but up. They had both devoted effort into bridging the chasm between them—slowly, tentatively, meticulously. Dick didn't know how long it would take to get back to what they were. He refused to accept that they never would be.

But this weekend had been part of those efforts, their first joint stakeout and away mission since Tim had donned the Red Robin cowl. Protocol dictated that partners take on any long-term stakeouts, to allow for bathroom breaks and rest, whenever possible. That protocol had long fallen by the wayside since Bruce's absence. Still, Dick could have chosen Damian; he knew it and so did Tim. He chose Tim.

He had asked Tim to come, then stocked their hideout with nostalgic snacks and the horrible energy/espresso combo drinks that Tim loved and that Dick reluctantly had to admit were useful for long hours and late nights. Damian would be with Bruce, so other than a text here or there, Dick wouldn't need to worry about how things were going in Gotham. It would be him and Tim, together in a sparsely furnished safe house, shoulder to shoulder with their monitoring devices trained on the apartment block across the street, with nothing to do but sit and watch and, he hoped, talk.

He missed his brother.

He had been looking forward to the weekend.

Dick had arrived first, giving himself time to set the stage and review

his props. Tim had arrived second and they had made small talk about travel between Gotham and Chicago before settling down in front of the window. Dick had caught Tim up to speed on what had happened —nothing—and was careful to slip in a casual quip or two that Tim could grin politely at. They were too good at this, both of them, knowing how to appear genuinely at ease and at their own pleasure while cogs churned relentlessly behind the scenes. Dick thought Tim was doing alright. He wasn't sure he would be able to know otherwise.

So he chipped away at the facade, joke by joke, story by story. He had a list a mile long in his head of stories he had hoarded to share, topics to bring up or avoid, contingency on contingency. It wasn't as deliberate and meticulous as it sounded, or maybe it was, but not as conscious. Dick knew better than to overthink. Overthinking was death, like freezing on a high wire act. He could prepare, but in the moment, it had to be all muscle memory and instinct.

It was still hard. So much of Dick's life had narrowed to the mask, and with the mask came Damian. Damian wasn't a fully forbidden topic of conversation, but he was a sensitive spot, one Dick took care not to press on too often. But skirting around mentioning Damian meant editing so much of his life now, and Tim had always been too good at spotting gaps.

Punting the conversation back into Tim's court didn't help much either. He had dropped out of school during that miserable year and had yet to pick classes back up again. Dick questioning that decision even out of concern as a fellow dropout had already been marked as out-of-bounds behavior. So no chatting about schoolwork or classmates or stupid teachers, long-ago safe havens from Tim's early Robin days now left for thorns.

Friends, too, should have been a safe topic. Tim loved his friends fiercely and the tangled relationships in the hero community meant overlap in their relative social circles, enough to keep Dick in the gossipy know on frictions and squabbles and shifting ties. Except Dick had let his ties molder while he had fought to keep Gotham from eating itself alive, no longer in the loop about the broader community. And it turned out Tim had done the same.

That put a sour lump in Dick's stomach, new but not unfamiliar. It appeared often, every time he earned another peek into Tim's life during his search for Bruce. He had failed to keep their family together, failed to listen, failed to keep Tim safe, but he was still

finding out, months later, how badly he had failed. This time, it was realizing Tim had truly been loose in the wind, without support or backup, without a single nosy friend to check in or notice if something happened. Dick would have noticed, eventually, and eventually would have been too late.

So no asking about Tim's friends. No talking about school. Tim's involvement with Wayne Enterprises had only ever been a front. They saw each other at the mandated weekly Manor dinners, so Dick had already heard the casual, light, factless chatter that Tim felt safe doling out on command, like gala banter tailored specifically for family. That only left mask and cape business, and not even all of it, because somewhere along the way, Tim had started coordinating more and more with Jason and Cass, and somewhere along the way, Dick had lost clearance to even ask.

The beginnings of the headache had started there, sparked by the friction of his careful verbal steps and the strained optimism fluttering in his chest. Still, Dick *was* optimistic. It was nature and habit, weft and weave, carefully intertwined to keep him aloft. Tim was here. They had the whole weekend together. They didn't need to talk for the time to be worth it. He just wanted to hang out with his brother.

They had settled into a comfortable silence, eyes on the building across the street. Their mission was surveillance only, noting who came and went, what blandly logoed trucks idled nearby, which windows remained stubbornly shuttered. It left a lot of time to talk and even more to marinate in what was left over. Dick had been mulling his next foray, mentioning the sequel of a spinoff of a show they had once both enjoyed, when Tim leaned forward in his chair and reached for the binoculars.

"What?" Dick asked, sitting up and leaning forward himself. There was slow but steady foot traffic in the street below with people crossing from one side or the other every fifteen seconds or so. Right now, a white car drove by, passing a cyclist and crossing in front of a pedestrian in a dark hoodie.

"Does that bleach stain look like a singing Godzilla to you?" Tim asked.

Dick blinked. "Does what what?" His gaze flicked across the scene, at last returning to the pedestrian, a man in a black hoodie mottled by a bleach stain up the back of the right sleeve, bleeding over onto the torso. He wasn't sure he was following. "Uh. I would have said more

of a hand puppet, but I guess? Why?"

Tim snorted and curled back in his chair, binoculars abandoned to type rapidly on his phone. Dick snatched up the binoculars. A ballcap pulled down against the glare of the setting sun shielded the man's face—Dick was only assuming it *was* a man based on the build and height—and there didn't seem to be anything particularly noteworthy about him. The hoodied stranger wasn't a lookout, or they would have seen him on an earlier pass in front of the building. He was just walking, hands resting in the pouch of the hoodie, pace casual, a bag slung sagging over one shoulder.

As Dick watched, the man removed his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen, slowing to read. He typed out a short reply, one-handed. One seat over, Tim's phone buzzed. He shot off a rapid-fire response. The man stopped walking and looked around, a little too casually, attention flitting from one potential vantage to the next. Then he looked down at the phone in his hand and stopped.

Dick had just opened his mouth to demand a little more information when the man pivoted bodily to stare directly at their hideout, face at last in full view. Dick recoiled on instinct at the direct stare, too close through the binoculars' magnification, despite knowing they couldn't be seen through the obscured glass. It wouldn't have mattered anyways. Jason knew exactly where to look and the flat set of his mouth communicated even across this distance how unimpressed he was. He let the look linger for just a moment, then casually resumed his perusal of the block, shot off one more text, and disappeared out of sight.

Tim was still texting a pat-a-pat-pat, the pads of his thumbs tapping rapidly against the screen, lips quirked. "He's coming up," he announced a moment later, then tucked the phone back into his pocket.

They sat quietly until there was a rattle at the door, a sound Dick placed as deft fingers jimmying a cheap lock only after the door swung open.

"Dingbat," Jason greeted breezily as he kicked backward and shut the door with one booted foot. "Dickwad."

That was Tim and Dick, respectively, it seemed, because Tim only rolled his eyes and slung back a sarcastic, "You're welcome."

"For what?" Jason was being, Dick felt, deliberately loud, letting his

bag fall with a thump, clomping across the thin floors. Dick would call it a tell, except Jason used it equally when he was trying to take up space to prove he wasn't nervous as when he was trying to be deliberately obnoxious, which helped obfuscate which he was feeling at any given time.

Or, Dick considered, Jason *had*. Dick couldn't really say if that insight applied to this new version.

"For giving you a nice, comfy chair to surveil from instead of the Truman loop you've got going on down there." Tim gestured toward the armchair in the corner and didn't quite keep the smug pinch of his lips at bay.

Dick did his best not to bridle at that, the claim over the seating *he* had arranged, the bolthole *he* had set up. He would have sworn he hadn't so much as twitched a muscle, but Jason's glance still cut to him, keen and wary, before returning to Tim.

Tim missed whatever Jason had caught but did seem to catch his own cue. He straightened, alert attention ping-ponging between them. "Having whatever angle you've got will help. Dick doesn't mind if you stay. Right?"

That last was directed at Dick, who answered automatically. "Of course." The smile that went with it was easy, effortless after so many years of practice. Warm but only a sliver of teeth instead of a full grin, a tilt up in one corner of his mouth but not the other—like a bartender working from muscle memory, he knew the perfect mix.

Phonier than a three-dollar bill.

Which wasn't how it should be. Jason had been keeping Dick at arm's length with an aggressive tenacity, despite Dick's best efforts. Turning this from one-on-one time to a group hangout shouldn't be a problem, particularly if Jason, miracle of miracles, were willing. He should be thrilled to have more time with them both.

That's what Dick told himself as he settled back in his chair and forced himself to relax. "Sorry, if I'd known the Red Hood had one end of this case already…" He trailed off, letting the silence imply that, of course, Jason would have been invited along. Two's company, three's a party and all that.

Jason's wary look didn't ease, but he did flop down into the offered chair. "S'fine." He glanced over the array of snacks and reached for a

bag of chips. “Quite the spread. Trying to send Alfred into apoplexy, I see.”

Dick crooked a smirk. “Stakeout rules.” No Alfred, no snitching.

“Apoplexy,” Tim echoed in a posh mid-Atlantic nasal tone, mocking.

“Shut up, dropout,” Jason said as he ripped open the chips bag, making Tim grin.

Grin?

“Hey, at least I made it to senior year,” Tim shot back, only the quickest glance out of the corner of his eyes giving him away. Dick sucked in breath through his teeth and tensed, but Jason only rolled his eyes.

“Like that was *my* fault," he groused around a mouthful of chips.

"Hey," Dick cut in, "I've got to put my one single semester at GCC to good use." He didn't normally bring up his stunted post-secondary record, still sensitive from his fights with Bruce even after all these years, but he would sacrifice his own ego a bit if it let him in on the banter.

But instead of another eye roll or snort, Jason frowned. "What's wrong with GCC?"

Dick blinked. "Nothing? I mean, you know." Jason and Tim were both staring at him now, so he gave a dismissive huff of a laugh. "Bruce, he gets so... you know how he is, about education. He thought I'd at least land at Gotham U, and even that would have been a disappointment, I think. GCC was... not on his radar."

Dick had been a disappointment. That was what it had felt like at the time and how it still did, years later. Even with the distance and maturity he had gained, even suspecting Bruce's complicated relationship with his own father and the legacy of Dr. Thomas Wayne, even *knowing* that Bruce loved him and was proud of him, it still stung. He had gotten better at feeling the snap of it without striking back, and also at learning to offer it up if it helped someone else. Self-effacement was a charmer's tool.

But instead of being charmed or even just mollified, Jason's scowl only deepened. Dick remembered with vivid intensity a much smaller Jason, brow low and chin sticking out in just that way, when Dick had

said something he considered stupid. Dick had never been sure what he had done wrong then either.

Tim cleared his throat. "So why don't you catch us up on your end of things?" he prompted Jason. "What's Hood got?"

Jason tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair once, an irritated flex, then visibly unclenched and turned his attention to Tim to give the summary on his end of their overlapping case. Dick listened, mouth locked shut, to give Jason time to reset. Tim gave him that time, asking the right questions to pull details out and override Jason's instinct toward caginess. He was good at it, even better than Dick remembered. It helped that Jason trusted Tim. Dick wasn't sure when or how they had evolved from enemies to allies, just known that it had happened, but he hadn't been prepared for them to be friends.

And they were. They joked. They *bantered*. They overlapped thoughts with enough ease that it was clear they had spent significant time in casual conversation. They didn't have the easy, uncomplicated rapport Dick had had with his Titans, for example, or the kind of understanding he had had with Bruce, where the majority of the exchange could be understood without words at all. Dick, as someone watching from a remove, might be able to catch the tiny hesitations, the underlying sensitivities to old wounds, but they both pushed through them or at least masked them more deftly than Dick had.

Dick felt like he was watching a miracle unfold.

He felt sick.

It was harder to mess up, he discovered, if he kept to business. This was a stakeout, after all, with bad guys to catch and wrongs to right. He at least knew how to be a hero, if nothing else. So when Jason finished laying out his side of the case, the mysterious arsons in his neighborhoods that all seemed to lead back to the same few names, Dick took up the thread smoothly, weaving its loose end into the armed robberies they had been tracking and the money trail that had led him to the group of ambitious men holed up in the building across the street. Their stories fit together neatly enough, two tributaries leading back to the same river of corruption. If nothing else, it would be a productive stakeout, professionally managed. Just not what he had imagined.

But Dick Grayson was no quitter. Business was safer, but he wasn't willing to give up just yet on the night he had envisioned. Dick

"Flexible" Grayson, that was him. He could make this work.

Except everything he tried was wrong. Joining the conversation felt like leaping for the trapeze off-rhythm, the bar pulling just out of reach every time. His jokes weren't funny or elicited a polite chuckle at best. The snacks he had brought were wrong, disdained by Jason and apparently against Tim's new, spleen-deprived diet. They talked around him, obliquely mentioning cases or people or memories he didn't know and couldn't access. He wanted to go home.

Instead, he wandered into the kitchen, then further into the tiny apartment's sole bathroom, out the window and onto the fire escape.

Dick leaned his elbows on the railing and sucked in what felt like the first true breath he had taken all night. He couldn't see their target from here, the entire apartment building at his back between him and their vantage point. Instead, he could look out over the dark back alleys between their street and the next, where tomcats yowled and sleepy men in boxers and slippers carried garbage to the bins. He could see between the buildings into the street beyond, where slices of streetlights illuminated pedestrians as they sauntered by. No one noticed him, a faint shadow on a rusting platform, not even a smoldering cigarette to light his face. He couldn't stay out here forever, he knew, but he didn't think he would be missed. He could just stand and breathe. Maybe the night air would take the edge off his headache and the acidic, burning jealousy in the back of his throat.

He didn't know how long he stayed. Long enough that the painful squeezing in his chest lessened and his arms, exposed in short shirtsleeves, grew numb from the constant abrading wind. Long enough that the noise in his head emptied out, leaving a stain of unhappiness but nothing more vile.

The window opened with a quiet noise at his back. Dick looked over his shoulder to see Tim peek out.

"Hey."

Dick's quiet "hey" in response seemed to be enough, because Tim crawled out of the window and onto the fire escape next to Dick.

"Movement across the street?" Dick asked. They didn't need him for that. Two met stakeout requirements, and Dick had already caught Tim up to speed on his side of the case. Between him and Jason, they had it covered.

"A couple people in and out. I took some photos with the long-range lens," Tim answered. He hesitated, then leaned his elbows on the rail, mimicking Dick's pose. "You disappeared."

Dick shrugged easily. His face had rearranged itself on cue, wiped clean, everything nasty and repulsive hidden away. "Just needed some air." He could see in his periphery Tim chewing on the inside of his cheek, taking in the non-answer.

"Are... Should I not have invited Jason up?" Tim asked at last.

"S'fine." If he wanted it to be true, it had to be, on some level.

"I can tell him to go?" Tim offered. He didn't sound positive about that.

"I said it's fine." Dick didn't snap. He even managed a smile. "Why wouldn't I want Jason around."

Shit. The Bruce non-question was a classic tell.

Tim frowned, then mumbled, "I'll tell him we've got it covered," as he turned back toward the window.

"No." Dick's heart rate spiked, imagining Jason's face when Tim tried to kick him out, knowing it was Dick's fault. Or worse, what if he did blame Tim? He readjusted his smile, pure Nightwing even out of costume. "C'mon, Tim, I said it was fine. I'm glad the two of you are getting along. It seemed like you had more fun once he showed up, anyways."

Instead of relaxing, Tim's eyes narrowed. Dick braced for an accusation or a jab, or for Tim to leave. Maybe when Dick went back inside, the little room would be empty, Tim and Jason both escaping to another spot to hang out together. Maybe that would be for the best. Let Tim go, give up on his big plans for brotherly bonding, and try again later. A fresh start after he figured out where he went wrong.

Instead, Tim fidgeted with the sleeve of his jacket, eyes dropping to the hem as he asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

Dick blinked. "What?" He turned to stare at Tim. Tim didn't repeat himself. “No, of course not.“ Irritation flared like a sparked lighter, and he ruthlessly snubbed it out. “I told you, I’m fine with Jason being here. More than fine. It’s great. Why wouldn’t it be.”

Another Bruce statement, double shit. He needed to keep it together.

Dick sucked in a steadying breath through his nose then let it out in a slow, silent release, trying to rub the tension out of his smile. “You’ve been great. I just… have a headache.”

If anything, Tim’s pensive expression had pinched further. “Jason said not to bother.”

“Not to bother with what?” His tone *was* too sharp then, he could hear it, like overcorrecting a wobble on the Highline.

“Getting you to tell the truth.”

Some back end of Dick’s brain, the investigative part, noted with pride that the Tim of a year ago would have never been so direct, even at such a low mumble. The much larger majority of his brain was too stunned to appreciate the growth.

"You think I'm *lying*?" The sting of being called out made his outrage spike. It had been months since Dick had stormed out of a conversation. Leaving, losing his temper, was something he couldn't afford to do with Damian. He wanted to so badly now. He could picture it, tossing off some self-righteous final word, grabbing his bag from inside, and disappearing into the night. Let Tim and Jason do the work.

He wouldn't. More than that, he couldn't.

Dick used to know how to talk to Tim. After Jason's death, Tim had been salvation not just for Bruce but for Dick, too. He had been a second chance, and Dick had thrown himself at the opportunity to be the brother he wanted to be with everything he had. He had *known* Tim, or thought he did. Bruce's death, the horrible year that had followed, the fights over Damian and over Tim's conviction that Bruce wasn't dead, the misunderstandings, the mistakes, they had all robbed him of his brother. He wasn't going to give him up again, not for anything, especially not his own hurt feelings.

Jason probably would have met Dick's offended outrage with a sneer and a challenge. Tim wasn't Jason, for all his new directness. He had curled in on himself, not shrinking but stubborn, a creature hunkering down to harden and weather the oncoming storm. To keep Dick out.

"Forget about it."

The last time Tim had said that, Dick had come back from patrol and Tim had moved out.

"Wait!" Panic hot and spiked clogged his throat. He could give up on the night, on all his plans and hopes, but they had been doing better lately. Screwing that up would—

Tim was waiting, just like he had begged. He wouldn't wait for long.

Dick tried to swallow, then ran a spread hand down his face. "Don't go." He sagged back against the railing, letting his shoulders slump for the first time that night.

Tim didn't go. But he also didn't speak. Instead he crossed his arms, leaned back against the facade of the building, and waited.

"I'm not lying," Dick insisted, low but urgent. He felt, horribly, fourteen years old, surly and baffled, while his friends confronted him about 'keeping them out.' It wasn't a lie, not really. Right? "I just..."

He was too old now to fidget. Too old to wrench his wrists around until they cracked, too old to twist his ankles or balance on the edges of his feet just to be able to move. Too old to translate the anxious, creeping dread into energy without looking untrustworthy or unstable. Dick scrubbed at the back of his neck instead and tried to shove every drop of sincerity he could into his voice.

"I just wanted tonight to go well." That was true. He wouldn't tell Tim just how much he had wanted tonight to go well, how much he had strategized and planned and *hoped*. That was, he thought, too much truth to be fair.

Tim waited without speaking. Dick knew that trick. He had grown up with it. He resented how well it still worked. Because he wanted it to?

"I wasn't a good brother to Jason." Tim had heard this before. Dick had said so before. Confessing his flaws had been like bloodletting, a quick pain to relieve dangerous pressure. "I wanted to be better with you. I wasn't." He had said this before, too, though less often. It was a newer shame.

Tim's brow had scrunched further, but he looked, Dick hoped, more thoughtful than angry now.

"I was hoping we could just... hang out. Catch up." Dick had threaded his fingers together loosely to keep himself from fidgeting, but he

flexed his thumbs wide in a helpless shrug of a gesture.

"And then I ruined it," Tim finished quietly.

"No." Let Tim accuse him of whatever lies he wanted to. Dick wouldn't let that one slide. "You didn't. I'm just... off-rhythm, I guess."

They were in mirrored poses now, Tim slanted against the building, Dick slumped against the rail. It was, Dick mused ruefully, the most aligned they had been in months.

"Do you remember our first stakeout?" Dick asked, soft and wistful. "That time we were trailing the splinter of the Maronis?" Tim nodded. "I was so excited about taking you out, showing you the ropes."

"Were you?" Tim asked, face brightening even in the Chicago dark. "I was never really sure if Alfred made you."

Dick shook his head. "Other way around. I begged to let you come." Begged Alfred. Bruce was still.... Bruce had been working through Jason's death, and it had made him weird and unnavigable where Robin was concerned. Even after all this time, that was still the case in some ways. "I knew you'd gotten chucked in the deep end, and I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Tim had been such an incredible kid, right from the first. Dick had never met such a gutsy kid before, so independent, so self-assured. He had blown in and taken them all up like it was his God-given job. He had even browbeat Batman into better behavior. But he had also been *a kid*, and one wearing Dick's colors. Dick had sworn to himself he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

He had picked a stakeout a lot like this one—low chance of danger, lots of time to sit and talk. They had been in a car instead of an apartment, a rental sedan that wouldn't stand out in the neighborhood, an array of snacks, and hours of waiting. Dick couldn't remember the outcome of the stakeout or of the case now. He just remembered the thrill of getting Tim to laugh so hard that he had tipped over into a giggle fit and the triumph of watching the shy neighbor kid's personality unfold like a flower in sunlight.

"I loved it." Tim tugged at a loose string on his cuff. "It was... great. It was a really great night for me." If his voice sounded quavery, it wasn't Dick's place to notice.

"I wanted tonight to be like that," Dick admitted. "Just you and me,

talking, hanging out. Being... being brothers again, as us, not as..." Out of the masks and capes.

Tim looked miserable. "And then I invited Jason up without asking."

"No. I messed up way, way before Jason." He just didn't know how, exactly, and that felt like the worst part. The fire escape was silent for a time, except for the distant rumble of traffic and a tomcat yowling.

When Tim spoke again, his voice had pitched higher, uncertain of his footing. "Why do you... do that? With people?"

"Do what?" Dick asked.

"The..." Tim faltered for words. "The Stepford Wife thing."

"The *what*?"

"When you go pod person." When Dick still stared blankly, Tim grimaced. "You get, um, kind of fake?" He shook his head and tried another route. "All—" He crooked one arm in a mockery of a jolly cartoon scout, a big, toothy grin distorting his features. When Dick's stare morphed into repelled horror, Tim ducked his head sheepishly. "Sorry. Maybe that was mean."

Tim shoved his hands into his pockets, perky posture and horrifying smile wiped away. "You didn't used to do it much, or maybe I didn't notice? But you get so... so slick? Like you're performing, but not in a good way." He grimaced again, either in memory or in anticipation of how his words might land. "I get you're trying but I don't know... I mean, I'm never sure how to..." He pulled his hands back out and made a vague, containing gesture.

Dick let out a bleak laugh and rubbed his hand over his face again. A fool, a fool, was he doomed to forever be a fool. "I was nervous. I was nervous and overthinking it all and didn't want to shove my foot into my mouth by saying the wrong thing. Even though I did anyways. Repeatedly."

"You were?" It hurt to hear how tentatively hopeful Tim sounded, before the hope collapsed into frustration. "Why didn't you just say that? I really looking forward to tonight, too, and then you were—" He gestured behind himself at the apartment, the little room. "I couldn't figure out why you were... Bruce does that sometimes, with strangers."

When he was being Brucie. Dick knew the shellacked version of Bruce all too well, with his off-putting faux-friendly act. It was hard to watch sometimes, even when Dick *knew* it was an act and not one aimed at him. It was like watching everything real be siphoned out of Bruce, leaving only a shell meant to lull and cajole and fool, keeping the other person at arm's length. *That* was what he had seemed like to Tim?

"I didn't want to mess up," was the only reason Dick could offer. "All I've done this year is hurt you. I didn't want to again." But he had anyways.

"And with Jason?"

God, he had been doing it to both of them. Dick flinched. "Same thing there. We've... You've been... more forgiving... than he has. Which I get," he hastened to add. "We just haven't had a lot of contact out of comms. And he's more, um, volatile."

Tell the truth.

He had gotten into this mess by self-editing. He could at least learn his lesson the first time.

"And I was jealous," Dick finished, reluctantly.

Tim's eyebrows shot up. "Of what?"

"You and Jason. Your–" It was Dick's turn to make a vague gesture in the general direction of the apartment. "Rapport. You seem comfortable with each other. I envy that. From both of you."

Dick had spent most of his life an only child. He didn't want to be one again, not for anything.

Tim was silent a long moment, digesting the idea. Dick knew enough of Tim's childhood to know he understood viscerally the lengths a person might go to to feel like they belonged. That *he* was the one in the in crowd and Dick wasn't was a new thing for him to consider.

"Oh," was all he said at last, in a small voice.

"I'm sorry." Dick reached out and touched Tim's elbow with just his fingertips. "Really. I messed up and I know it. If you want, I can head out, let you two take over."

"No." And there was the Tim Dick remembered, a little less baby fat in his cheeks but with the same set jaw and gleaming eyes. "No. This is going to be the best stakeout ever. Just... stop overthinking, stop acting, be chill. Okay? If you loosen up, Jason will loosen up. It'll be fine."

He sounded a little too much like he was trying to convince himself along with Dick, but Dick couldn't help grinning—for real, this time. On impulse, he snagged Tim across the shoulders and pulled him into a one-armed hug. His baby brother had grown, he noticed with another pang. Ah well, at least Dick was still taller for now.

Tim returned the hug with a tighter grip than Dick had been expecting. Dick made sure he wasn't the first to let go.

"We better go back in before Jason chews up the furniture," Tim deadpanned as he stepped back.

Dick let out a sharp, pleased laugh at the mental image, eliciting a sly grin in response from Tim.

"I *am* glad you're getting along," Dick repeated as they hefted the window back up. He didn't want that lost in all his mess. He could work through his jealousy and displacement on his own. Jason and Tim getting along was a wish he never thought he'd see come true.

It was Tim's turn to shrug. "He's alright, most of the time. We..." He hesitated, feeling out his words. "It's better, anyways."

"You're friends." Dick was proud that none of the wistfulness leaked into his voice.

Tim colored, the red in his ears and cheeks visible even in the low light. "Nahhh. We're... I mean, I like hanging out with him, but I don't want to push too hard or intrude or..."

"Maybe I'm wrong, but Jason doesn't really have a track record of *letting* anyone push him around." At least not since he came back. Dick nudged Tim with his elbow as he climbed through into the bathroom. "Maybe I'm not the only one overthinking."

Tim's thoughtful hum was the only response he'd get in that quarter, so Dick let the subject drop. They would both navigate their weird family in their own way, and that was okay, as long as they did it together.

"Hey, Jason," Tim called as they stepped out of the bathroom. "You got any meds? Dick's got a headache."

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